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Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind in England,

c.1650-1750¹

Drawing on national and regional letter collections dating from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, this article explores women's experiences of the life of the mind through an analysis of their letter-writing. This study also highlights the shortcomings of the compartmentalised nature of scholarship on women's writing and intellectual lives and proposes the letter both as a beneficial historical source and methodological tool for research on women's mental worlds. By employing an inclusive definition of intellectual and creative life, and eschewing traditional benchmarks of achievement, this article contends that women took a full part in the cultures of knowledge of their time.

Keywords: women's writing, letter-writing, manuscript studies

¹ This article owes a great debt to the insightful guidance of Penelope J. Corfield and the advice of Susan Whyman.

When reading the letters of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women it becomes clear that the social practice of letter-writing acted as a critical conduit of expression for those women who wished to experience a life of the mind.² In familiar letters of this period diverse cultures of learning were represented, including amongst others: self-education and critical reading practices, self-expressive writing, polemical writing, and the exchange of ideas with like-minded others.³ Typically, these different types of engagement with reading and writing have been treated separately, by distinct fields of scholarship. By using the letter as the starting point, this article will consider a range of approaches women took to thinking life. The emphasis will be placed on how women experienced the life of the mind and the role letter-writing played in that process, as opposed to their specific prowess in a given field of learning or genre of writing. This article therefore builds on the rich scholarship on this theme present in both literary studies and history. The examples of contemporary letter-writing explored here confirm the importance of research on manuscript collections as well as print sources to understand female experiences of, and contributions to, cultures of knowledge.⁴ As Jeremy Gregory has put it:

² This view was forged during research on a sample of around 4,000 letters written by women between c.1650-1750, located in national and regional archives, see L. Hannan, 'Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind in England, c.1650-1750' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2009). The central role of letter-writing in female intellectual life is also discussed in recent scholarship such as: M. Bigold, 'Letters and Learning' in R. Ballaster (ed.) *The History of British Women's Writing, 1690-1750* (Basingstoke, 2010) and E. Eger, *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Basingstoke, 2010).

³ For letter-writing as representation of the self see R. Earle, *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writing, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, 1999), especially contributions by Earle, Whyman, and Ditz; and for letters as a tool of education and socialisation see S. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009), 19-45.

⁴ All quotations from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters reproduced here, maintain the spelling and grammar of the original source.

It has largely been through the careful reading of previously unstudied letters, diaries and autobiographies written by women (as well as the study of their more self-consciously literary outputs such as novels, plays and poems) that we can begin at least to hear the lost voices of women in the past.⁵

Here, it is shown that letter-writing can offer insights into a range of relationships with writing. Correspondence is also revealing of who women wrote to: men, other women, groups of like-minded others, specific intellectual confidants or supportive family contacts. Moreover, as an artefact of human relationships, the letter places the impulse to read, think and write firmly within its social, political and cultural context.

This article proposes an interpretation of intellectual life that can more accurately be described as the ‘life of the mind’.⁶ Used most famously by Hannah Arendt, in her exploration of the ‘activity of thinking’, the phrase is employed here to emphasise the experience of thinking life as well as the tangible textual outcomes of thought.⁷ In Arendt’s discussion of the life of the mind, she identifies ‘the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content,’ as a defining feature.⁸ This inclusive approach to human thought is helpful when considering women’s epistolary writing in this period because it took such

⁵ J. Gregory, Review Article: ‘Writing Women in(to) the Long Eighteenth Century’, *Literature & History*, 11:1 (2002), 81.

⁶ Sylvia Harcstark Myers also used this term in the title of her seminal work on the bluestockings: *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, friendship, and the life of the mind in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1990), however, she never actually defines the phrase and seems to have chosen it simply to denote intellectual interest and engagement.

⁷ See H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vols. 1-2 (London, 1978).

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 5.

diverse forms and fulfilled multiple functions. Moreover, Arendt's conceptualisation of the life of the mind as being composed of three main mental activities: 'thinking, willing, and judging' bypasses traditional divisions between reason and intellect, contemplation and knowledge production. The case studies presented here, show women who were concerned variously with politics, piety and poetry; women who had both a sense of their own mental world and also an engagement with broader cultural life. For some, the wider intellectual world might only consist of the books that they read and the personal conversations that they had, but this still constituted a life of the mind. For others, social status, networks, and good fortune could lay bare a brighter constellation of intellectual stimuli. But at either end of the spectrum, women read books, conveyed thoughts and reasoned arguments in letters to others, and they also displayed a strong personal commitment to these activities. This approach treats sharp distinctions about original versus derivative thought with caution.

By envisaging an inclusive canon of women's writing for this period, it has been possible for scholars to overcome the centuries' old habit of overlooking female contributions to the intellectual world.⁹ The letter-writing that forms the focus of this study is not 'women's writing' in the same way as poetry penned in commonplace books, or manuscript writing that was circulated amongst coteries of writers. However, for some, the letter was a written performance, a product in its own right.¹⁰ For others, letters could present a range of writing, acting simultaneously as a forum for

⁹ See for example J. S. Millman and G. Wright (eds), *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Verse* (Manchester, 2005).

¹⁰ N. Deane, 'Reading Romantic Letters: Charlotte Smith at the Huntington', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 66 (2003), 393-410.

communication, a place to rehearse ideas, a method of gaining feedback, or a safe place to put down thoughts to be read by an audience of sympathetic friends and relatives. Women who wrote poems, plays or philosophical tracts, most often also wrote letters and it is this epistolary writing that can act as a key to their intellectual motivations and experiences.¹¹

Through the exploration of three main case studies, this article proposes that there is no clear dividing line between self-education and intellectual life. The examples will show that the same people who were engaged in reading and self-improvement were often responding to this material in considered and original ways. The examples of female correspondence analysed here were found through archival research which produced a larger cohort of ten case studies.¹² The three examples have been selected because they indicate the diverse relationships with thinking life that women were able to achieve through letter-writing. The original criteria for selection were an evident written fluency (not grammatical accuracy), a collection of extant letters numbering in excess of ten (replies preferred but not essential),¹³ and an indication in the letters of some personal commitment to reading, writing, and thinking. As the key research questions concerned women's epistolary practices and the life of the mind, rather than any specific social group, no emphasis was placed on elite women during the selection process. However, the examples here do hail largely from the upper middling

¹¹ For a pithy exploration of 'letters, sex and gender' see Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters*, 18-21 and 40-7.

¹² See Hannan, 'Women' (unpub. PhD thesis); research was undertaken in seven regional and two national archives and a total of 28 correspondence collections were consulted.

¹³ The wider sample of letter-writing used for this research did not apply the same criterion in terms of numbers of surviving letters, but in order for a letter-writer to be included as a major case study at least ten letters were required.

sort, gentry and elites of society, which is indicative of the constraints financial pressure placed on opportunities for contemplative pursuits.

For a real understanding of an era often celebrated for its intellectual ‘Enlightenment’, people who left a trace of their thinking should be recognised regardless of who they were, where they were, or in what extant form they expressed their ideas. So, here a ‘trace’ is regarded as at least ten extant letters which discuss female experience of reading, writing and thinking, although the case studies explored below draw on more numerous extant letter collections.¹⁴ Where letter-writers had few surviving letters or a correspondence with no surviving replies, more emphasis had to be placed on the qualitative detail the writer could provide in each of their letters on their relationship with the life of the mind. Moreover, no emphasis was placed on the women having been recognised for their intellect in their own time, either within their immediate circles or in wider society, or thereafter. Although, in most cases, the women’s fellow correspondents had a good impression of their motivations, most remained unpublished and uncelebrated by subsequent histories of learned women. Also, this study uses examples of women who enjoyed very different degrees of freedom to pursue intellectual activities. In one case, it was a lack of freedom that drove a seventeenth-century gentlewoman to write about what reading and self-betterment meant to her emotional world. But for another group of women, the benefits of being part of a more extensive network of intellectuals and published scholars proved enabling. Thus, examples of both the thwarted and the comparatively free can shed light on female engagement with the world of ideas.

¹⁴ For example, in the case of Anne Dormer, there are 32 extant letters and two fragments but the replies to her letters do not survive.

Women's Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind

Seventeenth-century gentlewoman, Mary Clarke (b. mid to late 1650s, d. 1705), of Chipley in Somerset, used her correspondence with her husband Edward Clarke to access information about current affairs, upon which she commented critically and intelligently.¹⁵ Edward Clarke entered Parliament as MP for Taunton in 1690 where he remained until his death in 1710 and, during this time, the couple experienced long periods of separation while Parliament sat.¹⁶ Mary Clarke's marital letters demonstrate a confidence in her abilities to run the Chipley estate and household without the help of her husband and it is there that Clarke brought eleven children into the world, eight of whom survived to adulthood.¹⁷

The Clarkes had an intellectually illustrious connection: Mary Clarke's cousin was the philosopher, John Locke, with whom her husband also had a strong and lifelong friendship.¹⁸ Both Mary and Edward Clarke exchanged many letters with John Locke from the 1680s onwards, several hundred of which survive to this day.¹⁹ Between 1684 and 1691, the Clarkes and Locke engaged in a three-way epistolary discussion about child-rearing, the results of which were immortalised in Locke's famous work of educational philosophy,

¹⁵ S. H. Mendelson, 'Clarke, Mary (d. 1705)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2010.

¹⁶ M. Goldie, 'Clarke, Edward (1649/51–1710)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Mendelson, 'Clarke, Mary'.

¹⁸ J. R. Milton, 'Locke, John (1632–1704)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008; M. Goldie (ed.), *John Locke: Selected Correspondence* (Oxford, 2002); A. Moseley, *John Locke* (London, 2007).

¹⁹ See E. S. De Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols. (Oxford, 1989).

Some Thoughts on Education.²⁰ However, despite the fact that the letters themselves discussed the particulars of rearing the Clarkes' children, the published version was stripped of these references and presented Locke's voice alone in its exposition of educational theory.

By looking at the original letters, a more complex picture of scholarship, debate and influence can be seen. For example, Mary Clarke's letters show that it was her influence that persuaded Locke to consider the upbringing of girls as well as boys, with particular reference to the Clarke's daughter, Elizabeth, who was a favourite with Locke.²¹ This work on female education was not, however, included in the published text of *Some Thoughts*. Perhaps even more significantly, and as Sara Mendelson has highlighted, Mary Clarke's letters to Locke took issue with his theoretically based principles on child-rearing, proffering as counter-balance her own maternal experience.²² Whilst enamoured with Lockean principles of reason and virtue, Mary Clarke followed her own observations when it came to decisions about her children's educations. For example, she saw that the individual characteristics of children demanded different approaches to their care; whereas Locke largely promoted one approach for all.²³ Furthermore, Mary Clarke sent both her girls and boys to school for periods of time, despite Locke's strong reservations about the value of such an education.²⁴ Ultimately, Mary Clarke placed the evidence of her own experience alongside Locke's theoretical position, to test its validity. Like many singly authored texts,

²⁰ S. H. Mendelson, 'Child-Rearing in Theory and Practice: The Letters of John Locke and Mary Clarke', *Women's History Review*, 19:2 (2010), 231-43; J. Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London, 1693).

²¹ Mendelson, 'Child-Rearing', 232-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 231-43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 239-41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

Locke's work on education obscures its debt to female thought. By reading the correspondence, it is possible to see Mary Clarke's lively and self-confident intellect, applied not only to the subject of child-rearing, but also to other topics of her personal interest.

Mary Clarke's marital letters meandered from the business of the estate, family news, remedies for sickness, and amusing anecdotes concerning the children, to direct requests for lists of how MPs had voted in Parliament that week. The fact that Parliament kept her husband away from home for large portions of the year may well have stimulated Clarke's interest in that subject. Indeed she had correctly judged her husband to be better placed to update her on parliamentary politics over other possible lines of enquiry. On 27 October 1691, Clarke thanked her husband for the votes, which he had detailed in his last letter and asked for further details about the key players:

I wase very Glad to heare of your Good health and returne you my thanks for it as alsoe for this by the Last post with the votes, pray in the next Letts know whats become of the discovery my L^d Bellemount²⁵ wase Like to make.²⁶

The information, which Mary Clarke elicited from her husband's letters, allowed her to follow the politics of her day, informed with up-to-the-minute news. She also commented on what she thought about political life and

²⁵ For Richard Coote, first Earl of Bellamont, politician and colonial governor, see R. C. Ritchie, 'Coote, Richard (1636-1701)', *ODNB*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn 2008. Mary Clarke's reference to Bellamont indicates that she was keen to remain up-to-date with topical political news.

²⁶ Somerset Archive and Record Office, Sanford Estate Papers, DD\SF/7/1/31, fo. 22: Mary Clarke to Edward Clarke, 27 Oct. 1691.

exposed her view that the age was one of great change and uncertain outcomes:

I thanke you for y^e Kings Speech whearein I find he thinkes the prosperity or ruen of the Kingdom depends on thiss sitting of parlement, thearefore I hope you will Looke aboute you and make what dispatch you Can and I pray God derecctt you all for the best but I phancy alittle of our Good and bad fortune depends on the minnisters of state to as well as on the parlement and I doupt nott but as the K[ing] Considers one he will the other, and take Care as he has done hitherto; to have all his afares mannaged for his one and his subjects Good and safty.²⁷

When she did feel strongly about what she had heard, she responded sharply with seemingly little concern for maintaining an image of retiring feminine modesty. On 28 April 1690, Clarke mocked the recent decisions made in Parliament:

by the Constant votes you send me I find that thiss parlement dose such Exterordinary things that I intend If my mind dose not alter and I come to towne while it sitts to put in a Bill to inable me to be att 2 places att once which would be very Convenent for me.²⁸

²⁷ SARO, SEP, DD\SF/7/1/31, fo. 12: same to same, 11 Oct. 1690.

²⁸ SARO, SEP, DD\SF/7/1/31, fo. 8: same to same, 28 April 1690.

During this month alone, Parliament had addressed issues as diverse as paving and cleaning the streets of London, discouraging the importation of thrown-silk, and preventing papists from disinheritng their protestant heirs. But by far the most extraordinary actions by Parliament in the last two years had been in relation to the new monarchs, King William and Queen Mary. On 9 April 1690 (nineteen days prior to Clarke's letter), the Commons read a bill from the Lords recognising the King and Queen.²⁹ This action related to the turbulent recent years in which King James II had been deposed and Parliament had chosen to convene, without a royal summons, in order to declare the former King's 'abdication' and choose William and Mary as his successors – a controversial act by a parliament. Clarke went on in this same letter to comment:

I find they Generally beleve when the Kinge is Gone into Ireland your time will be out, for the men doe soe Little Good that when the queene Comes to raine alone she will certainly have a parlement of women and see If they will a Gree anny better.³⁰

Here, Clarke may well have been referring to the divided vote in the House of Commons on whether to bring a Bill for the 'General Naturalizing of all Protestants' in April 1690.³¹ Although, Clarke's statement suggesting male

²⁹ 'House of Commons Journal Volume 10: 9 April 1690', *Journal of the House of Commons: volume 10: 1688-93* (1802), 372-3. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=29004>; date accessed: 30 Sept. 2012.

³⁰ SARO, SEP, DD\SF/7/1/31, fo. 8: Mary Clarke to Edward Clarke, 28 Apr. 1690.

³¹ On 10 April votes had been split 77 yeas and 82 noes on this issue, see 'House of Commons Journal Volume 10: 10 April 1690', *Journal of the House of Commons: volume 10: 1688-93* (1802), 373-4. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=29005>; date accessed: 30 Sept. 2012. Although many other votes cast this month in the Commons resulted in closely matched results on each side.

MPs were replaced with women was clearly a rhetorical flourish, it demonstrated the uninhibited style she adopted in letters to her husband. As Sara Mendelson has commented, Mary Clarke's epistolary style was: 'noteworthy for the ironic wit with which she deflates the pretensions of the male world of high politics.'³² Clarke was not making a feminist argument in this letter, but she was applying her critical eye to current affairs. Instead of claiming ignorance, Clarke demonstrated her firm grasp of national events. Rather than using apology and self-deprecation to disguise her considered statements, her views were made clear. Clarke's marital letters provide a tantalising, yet brief, insight into the life of a woman who had a strong interest in the political world. Clarke availed herself of as much information about her chosen subject as possible, given her geographical separation from the political hub of Westminster, using her correspondence network to her advantage. However, Clarke produced no great treatise on the state of late seventeenth-century politics and, like many intellectually engaged women, is only remembered for the trace she left in the thinking of a recognised intellect of her age: John Locke. In Clarke's case, her letters are evidence of her responses to the political world, but books and conversations with other readers could also provide the access point to what Justin Champion has described as 'a broader cultural system' of erudition.³³ The next case study will explore the ways in which reading could provide a space for intellectual self-betterment but in circumstances that did not facilitate exchange and, therefore, a deeper engagement with ideas.

³² Mendelson, 'Clarke, Mary'.

³³ J. A. I. Champion, 'Enlightened Erudition and the Politics of Reading in John Toland's Circle', *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 138.

An unusual example of a female reader and letter-writer dating from the later seventeenth century was Anne Dormer (c.1648-95) of Rousham House in Oxfordshire.³⁴ Dormer's thinking life is certainly difficult to categorise and she is not commonly thought of by historians as an 'intellectual' woman. However, her use of letter-writing as a form of self-expression is revealing about the developed and individualised relationships women could have with reading and writing in a period, and under personal circumstances, which did not encourage their intellectual activity.

Anne Dormer (née Cottrell) had an unhappy marriage to the Royalist widower Robert Dormer and her complaints about the dynamics of the relationship abounded in the letters she wrote to her sister, Elizabeth Trumbull, who was living abroad as an ambassador's wife in the 1680s. By contrast, Elizabeth had made a happy union with the lawyer and government official, William Trumbull, who was regarded favourably within the Cottrell family.³⁵ Only Anne Dormer's letters to her sister, Elizabeth, survive, but in these she was effusive about her love for her sibling. Sara Mendelson and Mary O'Connor have stressed the positive qualities of their sibling relationship:

Every letter Anne wrote to her sister provides evidence of the two siblings' fervent love for each other. The language of the letters is that

³⁴ M. E. O'Connor, 'Dormer, Anne (1648?-1695)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2009.

³⁵ A. A. Hanham, 'Trumbull, Sir William (1639-1716)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008; see for example, BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 163: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 24 Aug. c.1687.

of passionate mutual affection, the verbal outpourings of a staunch lifelong friendship.³⁶

However, Dormer's letters to her sister, whilst emotionally engaged, rarely responded to anything her sister wrote in a previous missive. They read, in fact, like introspective diary entries with little room – outside of the first few sentences – for the life events of her addressee. Admittedly, the correspondence probably suffered from the unreliability of the international post and long gaps between letters may well have made conversation difficult. Nevertheless, Dormer's letters are taken here to represent more of an insight into one woman's mind, than into the particular dynamics of a sisterly relationship.³⁷

Anne Dormer took refuge in reading and writing letters as an escape from the dissatisfying and limited nature of her life at Rousham House. Married in 1668, Dormer became step-mother to a ten year-old stepson, Robert, and subsequently had eleven children, eight of whom survived into adulthood. Dormer felt tormented by her husband, whose behaviour she described as erratic, provocative, and destructive of marital harmony.³⁸ There are only glimpses of Dormer's thoughts on the texts that she was reading, but otherwise her letters revealed a woman who was articulate, argumentative and

³⁶ S. Mendelson and M. O'Connor, "Thy Passionately Loving Sister and Faithfull Friend": Anne Dormer's Letters to her Sister Lady Trumbull' in N. J. Miller and N. Yavneh, *Sibling Relations and Gender in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot, 2004), 206.

³⁷ See also M. O'Connor, 'Representations of Intimacy in the Life-Writing of Anne Clifford and Anne Dormer' in P. Coleman, J. Lewis, and J. Kowalik (eds), *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2000), 79-96.

³⁸ See M. O'Connor, 'Interpreting Early Modern Woman Abuse: The case of Anne Dormer', *Quidditas*, 23 (2002), 51-67 for an analysis of Dormer's letters as evidence of domestic violence. Sara Mendelson has also discussed Anne Dormer's strategic use of local gentry contacts for moral support in her turbulent relationship with her husband, see: 'Neighbourhood as Female Community', in Tarbin and Broomhall, *Women, Identities and Communities*.

intelligently critical of the social conventions and marital norms of her age. Amid this commentary, Dormer made it clear how important the cultivation of her mental world was to her survival of her unhappy married life. She described her urge to read as follows:

then I gett a little release and run to my deare Book to put some thoughts in my mind that looks reasonable to me, for I can hear nothing from my Ld that either entertaines or satisfies my mind nor speake nothing that he doth not object against or find fault with, I have lived this winter I may almost say quite alone.³⁹

In September c.1687, she again described the solace she found in retreating to her books: 'I bless God I find every day more pleasure, and more and more comfort in reading, and see less and less pleasure in anything in this world.'⁴⁰ Dormer framed her reading and solitary habits as part of a bid to better herself in both mind and spirit. In January 1689 she confessed:

the more I am alone the more I love to be so, and the more time I gett to my self the greater advance I hope I make in correcting my follies.⁴¹

Dormer described her attempt to reconcile herself to her situation and seek refuge and remedy in her mental world:

³⁹ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 201: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 28 Jan. 1688/89.

⁴⁰ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 168: same to same, 10 Sept. c.1687.

⁴¹ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 201: same to same, 28 Jan. 1688/89.

methinks now I begin to hope I do conform to my condition in a better degree then I did, and strive to make the right use of it, by improving my mind so as to hope to be bettered by the course of life which I am dayly more and more satisfied in.⁴²

Dormer's letters are illustrative of the ways in which women who were hampered in their pursuit of a life of the mind experienced their lives and challenged its boundaries.

The genre of the literature that Anne Dormer named in her letters was exclusively religious and Dormer expressed herself eloquently on the emotional, religious and educational importance of reading. Where Dormer mentioned particular texts or authors, her clear intention was to take spiritual lessons from her reading.⁴³ Dormer's engagement with books and solitary study formed part of a programme for pious existence.⁴⁴ In November c.1688, drawing on the Old Testament, Dormer equated her own trials in life to those of the Israelites:

I was indeed some time in the case of the children of israel who when they were cruelly oppressed could not for sometime by reason of their bondage consider the message they received from Moses but after a time they saw they intended them a reall deliverance and in this of mine I am I thank God at last delivered from placing any delight in the

⁴² BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 193: same to same, 3 Nov. c.1688.

⁴³ For further discussion of popular Bible reading, see S. Mandelbrote, 'The English Bible and its Readers in the Eighteenth Century', in I Rivers (ed.) *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays* (London, 2001), 35-78.

⁴⁴ See P. Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720* (London, 1993), 73-97.

varieties of the world, I see those who studdy to find happyness in it
are like the disciples who toile all day and catch nothing.⁴⁵

Elsewhere, Dormer mentioned reading religious writers such as the celebrated author of theological works, Isaac Barrow.⁴⁶ Moreover, she viewed this reading as a way of connecting with her absent sister who she assumed would also have a copy of Barrow's work close at hand:

you have them I suppose, when you read them my deare heart think of
me as I do of thee with more tenderness then is good for either of us at
this distance to taulk of.⁴⁷

The preacher and man of letters, Bishop Jeremy Taylor (1613-67),⁴⁸ also gained a mention, as Dormer bemoaned her father's negative response to her reading. 'my fa:[ther] reproaches me for my scruples and cryes I am righteous over much and then wishes I had never read B^p Taylor.'⁴⁹ This comment betrayed the particularly adverse circumstances in which Dormer pursued a contemplative life. On the one occasion Dormer commented on her husband's reading, in a passage describing his last illness, her focus was again spiritual:

⁴⁵ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 193: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 3 Nov. c.1688.

⁴⁶ M. Feingold, 'Barrow, Isaac (1630-1677)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2007.

⁴⁷ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 192v: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 3 Nov. c.1688.

⁴⁸ J. Spurr, 'Taylor, Jeremy (bap. 1613, d. 1667)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn 2006. Taylor was best known for his devotional works such as *Holy Living* (London, 1650) and *Holy Dying* (London, 1651).

⁴⁹ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 213v: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, 10 Dec. c.1689.

two dayes before he was taken ill he read a sermon of D^r Tillotsons⁵⁰ upon this Text while we are present in the body we are absent from the Lord, and when I came into the roome my deare said here methinks here is a pritty passage and so discoursed to me of what he had read, which I scarce ever knew him to before in his life; or so much as owne he had read when he did read.⁵¹

Although these last two examples named texts with which Dormer was familiar, they also provided clear evidence of the lack of encouragement that she received from her family members. Whilst her husband had never before his last moments discussed a book with Dormer, her father had concretely disapproved of her reading at all. In this unfavourable environment, it was no surprise that Anne Dormer viewed her engagement with reading, thinking and expressing her opinions as oppositional.

Anne Dormer's reading also armed her with ammunition for arguments she had with her husband and father, further reducing their support for her bookish interests. Significantly, Dormer used explanations for her husband's aberrant behaviour that might have come from misogynistic tracts on the female character. She criticised his lack of reason, changeable mood and inability to control his emotional reactions to situations: 'his fancy and his humore he is resolved to follow and when ever his reason stirrs he finds it so troublesome that his first care is to stifle it'.⁵² This example demonstrates

⁵⁰ I. Rivers, 'Tillotson, John (1630-1694)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Archbishop Tillotson published a sermon on 'The Wisdom of being Religious' in 1663 and a pamphlet entitled 'The Rule of Faith' in 1666.

⁵¹ BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 203: Anne Dormer to Elizabeth Trumbull, St James' Day (25 July c.1689).

⁵² BL, TP, Add. MS 72516, fo. 201: same to same, 28 Jan. 1688/89.

Dormer's method of citing contemporary cultural paradigms, in this case subversively, to strengthen her chosen line of argument.

The inclusive definition of the life of the mind employed in this article, allows the inclusion of examples of thwarted efforts, which are illustrative of women's motivations for reading, writing and exchanging ideas. Had reading and forming reasoned arguments to others constituted an unchallenged aspect of Dormer's life, it might have occupied less of a central space in her letters to her sister. As Emily Hodgson Anderson has argued for women playwrights and authors, 'gender-specific constraints on expression – and types of authorship – made the eighteenth-century woman particularly likely to gravitate toward such frames, particularly attuned to issues of self-expression within her life and work.'⁵³ This conclusion is borne out in the more informal letter-writing of intellectually motivated women of this period.

Anne Dormer sought self-betterment through the reading of religious and devotional texts. In argument, she incorporated her understanding of Barrow, Taylor and Tillotson to bolster her defence. However, Dormer could not be said to have achieved the status of a religious thinker. Instead, Dormer's reading and thinking about religious texts gave her mental strength and rhetorical power in battles with her family. Although she expressed thoughtful and thought-provoking ideas in her letters to her sister, she lacked the meaningful exchange that would have brought more satisfying results for her mental life. Nevertheless, Dormer's relationship with the life of the mind was evident in these letters, however obstructed by her domestic and social environment. Hence she provides an important example of the seventeenth-

⁵³ Hodgson Anderson, *Eighteenth-Century Authorship*, 2.

century thinking woman. The next section will explore a circle of letter-writers whose personal circumstances gave them much greater freedom to pursue their intellectual aims.

The Grey Circle

Having focused on examples of female intellectual motivation which were in some ways constrained by circumstance, the discussion moves to consider a circle of three women who were embarked on a much freer programme of intellectual exploration. Moreover, the women were part of a wider community of intellectually engaged individuals who both supported their learning and profited from their ideas. As Sylvia Harcstark Myers has stressed: 'For these eighteenth-century women autonomy also followed connectedness.'⁵⁴

In the 1730s, three young women became friends and remained life-long correspondents and intellectual companions. Their names were Jemima Campbell, later Marchioness Grey, (1723-97),⁵⁵ her aunt Mary Grey, later Gregory, (1719/20-1762)⁵⁶ and the diarist and author, Catherine Talbot (1721-70).⁵⁷ The latter has gained scholarly attention as a member of the bluestocking circle and she maintained correspondences with other high-profile women of that eighteenth-century coterie.⁵⁸ However, her friends

⁵⁴ Harcstark Myers, *Bluestocking Circle*, 15.

⁵⁵ J. Collett-White, 'Yorke, Jemima, suo jure Marchioness Grey (1722-1797)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Godber, *Marchioness*.

⁵⁶ Mary Grey was only three years older than her niece, Jemima Campbell, and they had a sisterly relationship; see Godber, *Marchioness*, 11-14.

⁵⁷ R. Zuk, 'Talbot, Catherine (1721-1770)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ In particular Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806). See Harcstark Myers, *Bluestocking Circle*; R. Zuk, *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738-1785*, vol. 3 (London, 1999); C.B. Rasmussen, "'Speaking on the Edge of my Tomb": The Epistolary Life and Death of Catherine Talbot', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 8:2 (2010), 255-75.

Jemima, Marchioness Grey and Mary Gregory have largely escaped notice as intellectual women.⁵⁹ Their letters, on the other hand, have survived in significant numbers and testify to years of intellectually challenging conversation. When the three friends first met as teenage girls, an important aspect of their bond lay in their shared reading. In 1738, Jemima Campbell wrote to Catherine Talbot, to comment on their mutual progression into bookishness:

We shall be such meer Book-Worms that t'will be absolutely impossible to travel even from hence to London without contriving to get some Shelves put up on the coach, & so turn it into a Library.⁶⁰

This habit of sharing ideas about the books that they read would last their lifetimes.

It is significant that amongst their circle of acquaintance were several scholarly men who were favourable to the idea of educating women. For example, Talbot had grown up in the household of the formidable intellect and cleric, Thomas Secker,⁶¹ who had ensured that she received an unusually thorough education for a girl of her time.⁶² Subjects included Classical,

⁵⁹ Archivist James Collett-White of the Bedfordshire and Luton Archive has made efforts to publicise the wealth of women's writing evident in the Lucas Papers, besides his entry for Jemima, Marchioness Grey in the *ODNB* see: http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/aristicratic_women_part_1/introduction-by-james-collett-white.aspx (accessed 12 August 2012).

⁶⁰ Bedfordshire and Luton Archive, Lucas Papers, L 30/9a/3, fo. 61: Jemima Campbell to Catherine Talbot, c.1737/8 [copy].

⁶¹ J. Gregory, 'Secker, Thomas (1693-1768)', *ODNB* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn 2012.

⁶² The Reverend Thomas Secker had taken Catherine Talbot's mother, Mary, into his household when he married Catherine Benson, as Mary Talbot had been residing with Benson since her husband's death in 1720. The Talbots lived in his household until Secker's death in 1768 and in the early 1740s, Mary Grey joined Talbot there.

English, French, and Italian literatures, alongside history, the arts, astronomy, and scripture. Such was Talbot's talent, and Secker's early encouragement, that her girlhood compositions were circulated in society, gaining Talbot a reputation as a child prodigy that she later came to resent.⁶³ In adult life, Talbot's intellectual work was inhibited by the time and energy she devoted to managing Secker's affairs. Nonetheless, Talbot's place within Secker's household had enhanced her opportunities to connect with wider scholarly circles.

When Jemima Grey married Philip Yorke in 1740, she made a sound choice - Yorke was committed to the pursuit of learning and he operated in circles of writers and critics that included women. Despite a long and diligently executed career in politics,⁶⁴ Yorke's real passion lay elsewhere. Whilst at Cambridge, Philip and his brother Charles had embarked on the writing of *Athenian Letters*, a project that married their literary and classical interests.⁶⁵ Notably, Catherine Talbot was one of the several authors of this text, which was printed for private circulation in two volumes in 1741 and 1743. Philip Yorke maintained his interest in the intellectual world by becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries in 1741 and 44 respectively and embarking on a series of scholarly projects.⁶⁶ For example, he worked for many years with Arthur Onslow⁶⁷ on an edition of

⁶³ Zuk, 'Talbot, Catherine'; and Harcstark Myers, *Bluestocking Circle*, 213.

⁶⁴ Philip Yorke was elected in 1741 to the House of Commons for Reigate in Surrey and in 1747 he stood in Cambridgeshire and later took up a seat in the House of Lords; Yorke had come from a political family, his father, the First Earl of Hardwicke, had been Lord Chancellor.

⁶⁵ S. L. Barczewski, 'Yorke, Philip, second earl of Hardwicke (1720-1790)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Arthur Onslow was the Speaker of the House of Commons 1728-61, see Godber, *Marchioness*, 32; and P. Laundy, 'Onslow, Arthur (1691-1768)', *ODNB*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008.

Bishop Gilbert Burnet's *History of My Own Time*.⁶⁸ Yorke was also an avid collector of historical documents and, given the scarcity of earlier antiquarian finds, he was likely to have been most successful in amassing examples of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts.⁶⁹ This habit would certainly have contributed to his abilities to edit Burnet's work of seventeenth-century history, which focused on the years of Civil War and Commonwealth.

In addition to Yorke's interest in English history, his name appeared in several prefaces to literary works, highlighting his connections to a range of contemporary writers. For example, the poet Edward Young dedicated to Yorke one of his *Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* (1742), as did the critic Thomas Edwards in his *Canons of Criticism* (1750).⁷⁰

By marrying the academically minded Philip Yorke, Jemima Grey was able to broaden her letter-writing circle to include other like-minded women and men.⁷¹ Furthermore, Yorke himself was sympathetic to Grey's self-educational endeavours and the intellectual sociability that took place at the Yorke residences included both men and women.⁷²

Mary Grey's marital match with the academic Dr David Gregory also connected the women to intellectual circles.⁷³ Gregory was well travelled and fluent in a range of modern languages. Like Yorke, his political allegiances

⁶⁸ M. Greig, 'Burnet, Gilbert (1643–1715)', *ODNB*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008.

⁶⁹ Godber, *Marchioness*, 31-2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 24, 31; and J. A. Dussinger, 'Edwards, Thomas (d. 1757)', *ODNB*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008.

⁷¹ For example, Jemima Grey maintained a thoughtful correspondence with Yorke's sister, Elizabeth Anson, see BLA, LP, L 30/9/3, fos 1-116: Elizabeth Anson to Jemima Grey, 1748-59.

⁷² Barczewski, 'Yorke, Philip'; see also the quotation on page 26 below, which comments on the 'lectures' that took place at Wrest Park. Also, on 8 July 1745, Jemima Grey describes after dinner reading in mixed company, commenting that the gentlemen present had, to her surprise, not read *Arcadia* (probably referring to the late sixteenth-century text by Sir Philip Sidney), BLA, LP, L 30/9a/1-3, fos 49-51: Jemima Grey to Mary Gregory.

⁷³ E. T. Bradley, 'Gregory, David (1695/6-1767)', rev. S. J. Skedd, *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

were with the Whigs and he assiduously promoted their interests within the University of Oxford. As a young man, in 1724, David Gregory had become the first professor in history and modern languages at the University. Moreover, Gregory was an innovator – reforming the curriculum to offer students four years of study across classics, poetry, history, logic, mathematics, philosophy, and divinity.⁷⁴ The Grey-Gregory marriage was mutually beneficial. On the one hand, Mary Gregory's lofty social connections to court circles enhanced her husband's political influence, but Gregory's university position also kept his wife in touch with the academic world. Mary Gregory's child-rearing certainly proved tough competition for her scholarly pursuits, but through her husband's prominent position at Oxford she was able to keep abreast of developments - social, political, and intellectual - across the University.⁷⁵ The circles in which all three women moved, therefore, were on the whole supportive of the intellectual pursuits they undertook, providing them with sources of information - literary, historical and contemporary - and the company of like-minded people.

However, whilst comparatively fortunate in their intellectual freedoms, the women of the Grey circle did also exhibit reservations about the place of the 'learned lady' in eighteenth-century society. In fact, the prologue to Sylvia Harcstark Myers' seminal work on the bluestocking circle provides a vignette concerning Jemima, Marchioness Grey - illustrating the contested nature of female intellectual endeavour in this period. Describing Grey as an 'obscure woman with intellectual interests', Harcstark Myers presents an episode when Grey 'expressed her sense of unease at the idea that she might be suspected of

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ See BLA, LP, L 30/9/50/1-43: Mary Gregory to Jemima Grey, 1750-7.

being a learned lady.⁷⁶ The concern had arisen when Grey was loaned a new translation of *Horace* by the Reverend Thomas Secker. Grey worried that the delivery of these four large volumes for her attention would look unseemly. Furthermore, the books contained both the Latin and English versions of the text and might, therefore, give the impression that Grey was proficient in reading the former – hardly, she thought, an appropriate skill for ‘a Fine London Lady.’⁷⁷ As it was, Jemima Grey could not read Latin and engaged with all the texts of classical antiquity in translation.⁷⁸ As Grey herself acknowledged, this lack of understanding of the ancient languages limited the scope of her academic status in eighteenth-century society. Not wishing to apply an eighteenth-century view of educational attainment, the fact that these women did not read Greek and Latin is not considered here as a barrier to their intellectual engagement with the world of ideas.

The Grey circle tracked their own ‘Joint History’ through the books they had shared.⁷⁹

L^{dy} Carpenter tells me she hears poor Old Rollin⁸⁰ had finished his Roman History before he died. I shall be glad if it’s true: - but are you not very sorry for Him? I have been used to love & esteem him so long, & he has given me so much Entertainment, . . . Besides I have another Obligation to him far superior to all the Others: for to him I owe the Happiness of the greatest part of my Life, since He in a

⁷⁶ Harcstark Myers, *Bluestocking Circle*, 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Jemima Grey read French, but texts in Latin, Greek and Italian she read in translation, see Collett-White, ‘Yorke, Jemima’.

⁷⁹ BLA, LP, letter 448: Catherine Talbot to Jemima Grey, 7 Oct. 1742 [modern transcript].

⁸⁰ Charles Rollin (1661-1741), a French historian, who published his *Ancient History* in the 1730s and later his *Roman History* in 1741.

manner began our Acquaintance. Had it not been for Rollin, we should perhaps never have known enough of each Other to enjoy the Pleasures of Friendship, but might have been just so much acquainted as to Curtsy cross a Room, have each Others Name down in a long List of Visits instead of at the Bottom of a Hundred Letters.⁸¹

This connection was maintained throughout their adult lives, by not only suggesting reading for one another, but taking pleasure in reading the same books at the same time. Jemima Grey wrote to Talbot on 7 September 1742:

I am much pleased we have sympathised so much without knowing it; & that you too are studying Clarendon.⁸² He has been my Study ever since I came here, but as I have a great deal of Time & do nothing else, I shall dispatch it quicker than you, . . . Alas! why should our Eyes travel over the same Pages & yet be at such a distance from One Another's! Why must we see the same Words, & not be able to see what we wish so much for each Other! Could I join in your Morning & Evening Lectures together, & go on with Clarendon with you after Supper, how happy would it make me.⁸³

Like her husband, Jemima Grey was interested in the history of the previous century and all three women read the Earl of Clarendon's history of the Civil

⁸¹ BLA, LP, L 30/9a/3, fos 75-76: Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, Sept. 1741 [copy].

⁸² Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon (1609-74), English historian and statesman whose published works included *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England: Begun in the Year 1641* (1717), see P. Seaward, 'Hyde, Edward, first earl of Clarendon (1609-1674)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008.

⁸³ BLA, LP, L 30/9a/3, fo. 87: Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 7 Sept. 1742 [copy].

War and Commonwealth period with its moderate royalist perspective on events. As Paul Seaward has emphasised, Clarendon's *History* was 'the most sophisticated and finely balanced history yet written in English' and incorporated 'a forensic dissection of character and issue, and a sense of the depth of individuals' moral responsibility for their actions'.⁸⁴ Clarendon had been intimately involved in the political events of his time and his account could, therefore, lay claim to the authority of first-hand experience. Jemima Grey certainly counted Clarendon amongst the great writers and intellects of his age. In a letter joking about her own intellectual achievement, Grey mentioned Clarendon amongst a list of other 'Great Men':

This shows beyond all Dispute that my Stars are more in Fault than me, & had not their Cruelty confined me to this Trifling Insignificant Age . . . but produced me in the same Age as a Milton, a Shakespere, a Pope, A Newton, a Clarendon, or any Other Great Men you please to add, I should without doubt have been equal to any of Them. O Sad! who can help these Misfortunes!⁸⁵

The Grey circle's reading of Clarendon allowed them to engage with a witness testimony concerning the political upheavals of the seventeenth century and compare this with other writings on this period.⁸⁶ Grey's letter also demonstrated her need for shared intellectual endeavour. Just a month later,

⁸⁴ See Seaward, 'Hyde, Edward'.

⁸⁵ BLA, LP, L 30/9a/2 fos 89-90: Jemima Grey to Catherine Talbot, 3 Oct. 1742. The underlining of 'a Clarendon' is taken from the original.

⁸⁶ See below, 40-1.

Catherine Talbot mentioned ‘Comfortable Evenings of Laughing Quadrille & Instructive Clarendon’ in a letter to Mary Grey, showing that all three women were reading Clarendon at this time.⁸⁷ Where possible, the women did undertake their reading of texts simultaneously as this practice not only strengthened their intimacy but also facilitated their exchange of ideas.

Amongst the catalogue of visits, breakfasts, tea-taking and dinners, Mary Grey described how she and Talbot spent their time:

Why, from breakfast to Dinner Kitty reads & I work or perhaps she draws or works [embroiders] whilst I read a sermon & Homers Odyssey,⁸⁸ upon which we speedily intend to publish notes not being at all satisfied with those already wrote we have read Nine books & I think the Eighth is our favourite of all those that are to come enough to judge if it will be so of the whole from four to six in the afternoon we retire again, to our Italian & digressions, to writing if either of us is so disposed or to Hanyer’s History⁸⁹ at six we either go out or walk in the Gallery till tis dark.⁹⁰

This round up of a day’s activities shows the easy interaction between household life – meals, needlework, or walks – and reading. Moreover, the women ranged widely across genres, punctuating their reading with discussion

⁸⁷ BLA, LP: Catherine Talbot to Mary Grey, 7 Oct. 1742 [modern transcripts].

⁸⁸ The legendary ancient Greek epic poet, Homer, has traditionally been considered the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

⁸⁹ Hanyer is not immediately identifiable and the British Library catalogue acknowledges no author by that name. The name may well have been a mis-spelling on Grey’s part; but her reference again indicates the extent of her reading in history, as well as in classics and literature.

⁹⁰ BLA, LP, L 30/9/53/3: Mary Grey to Jemima Grey, 17 Aug. 1740.

and writing of their own.⁹¹ The stated intention to revise and publish notes on the *Odyssey* points to the women's close connections with scholars, writers and the world of publishing. No notes on Homer's *Odyssey* were ultimately authored by these women, but it is possible that they contributed their ideas on the subject to discussions with others who had more to gain by publishing their work.

In these women's letters, descriptions of daily routines were interspersed with closer analyses of particular texts. In June 1744, Talbot commented on her reading of Petrarch and Tasso:

I do not much wonder at your not being very fond of Petrarch,⁹² because I am only fond of several particular Sonnets, & I think the Sonnet way of writing in general very tiresome. Tasso's⁹³ is less so because being less stupidly constant he has a greater variety of subjects.⁹⁴

This passage demonstrates the sympathy between Grey and Talbot when it came to their tastes for literature.⁹⁵ Talbot herself experimented with a broad range of form in her own writing, including essays, poems, allegories, and pastorals. This personal versatility contrasted with the rigidity of form she

⁹¹ For early influences on subjects studied by girls see M. Cohen, "'A Little Learning'?: The Curriculum and the Construction of Gender Difference in the Long Eighteenth Century', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29:3 (2006), 321-35.

⁹² F. Petrarch, *Rime* (1360).

⁹³ T. Tasso, *Rime del Signor Torquato Tasso* (1608).

⁹⁴ BLA, LP, letter 3356: Catherine Talbot to Jemima Grey, 15 June 1744 [modern transcript].

⁹⁵ It is likely that the women were reading these texts in translation because, as noted above, Jemima Grey only read French in the original, although Catherine Talbot had more developed skills as a linguist.

identified in Petrarch's sonnets.⁹⁶ Talbot's own influences included the poet, Elizabeth Singer Rowe, whose work she encountered in manuscript form via her friendship with Rowe's patron, the Duchess of Somerset.⁹⁷ In Rowe, Talbot found another female writer concerned with religion and one who exhibited a female voice that was independent, moral, and learned. Moreover, in Rowe's work Talbot may have found a cue for her greater admiration of Tasso. In *Letters Moral and Entertaining* (1729-32), Rowe's own letters were interleaved with her translations of Tasso, amongst other verses and pastorals.⁹⁸ In discussing medieval and early modern poets with her friend, it is possible that Talbot also revealed the influence of women writers on her reading.

The correspondence showed the three women entering eagerly into the debates of their age and, moreover, feeling it necessary to form an opinion on the basis of their wide reading. On 24 November 1743, Jemima Grey called on her two friends to accept the challenge of commenting on a packet of information concerning King Charles I that she had read and would send to them. She anticipated that they would strongly disagree with what it contained, but in the interests of broadly surveying available information on the subject, felt it important that they absorb contrary views to their own.

M^r Birch brought a great Pacquet with him last Monday, that it was agreed ought to be communicated to you both, though he fears he shall

⁹⁶ Talbot logged her writings in her 'green book', which sat in her 'considering drawer', but consistently eschewed the distribution or publication of her work, see Harcstark Myers, *Bluestocking Circle*, 213.

⁹⁷ See J. Pritchard, 'Rowe, Elizabeth (1674–1737)', *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, 2008; and Harcstark Myers, *Bluestocking Circle*, 214-5.

⁹⁸ See Pritchard, 'Rowe, Elizabeth'.

incur your Displeasure by it; since they were all Materials for a strong Abuse upon King Charles the First, & some Remarks might possible be drawn from them upon my Lord Clarendon's Partiality for not mentioning them. . . . Now Ladies, what do you say? Are not you at all stagger'd in your Opinion of your Heroe? or don't you believe any of these Facts? One or Other must be the Case.⁹⁹

Clarendon was an important figure in the Grey circle's canon of great writers. Moreover, their joint reading of his work had played a role in cementing their friendship. Clarendon's *History* was not published until 1702, thirty years after the text had been put together by the author, in part due to the political controversy surrounding Clarendon and his writings.¹⁰⁰ Once published, Clarendon's text sustained a prolonged attack from John Oldmixon, who disputed its accuracy and accused a circle of high Tories at Christ Church, Oxford of interfering with the text to suit their political ends.¹⁰¹ By engaging with material produced by the critics of Clarendon, the women betrayed an empirical approach to their studies. They stood at barely one hundred years distance from the history that they studied and accounts of regicide, Interregnum and Restoration were still allied to political and religious territory firmly occupied and defended by the 'great men' of early eighteenth-century public life. By tackling these debates, and considering the validity of the available evidence, the Grey circle demonstrated an intellectual verve that

⁹⁹ BLA, LP, L 30/9a/1, fos 18-22: Jemima Grey to Mary Grey and Catherine Talbot, 24 Nov. 1743 [copy].

¹⁰⁰ See Seaward, 'Hyde, Edward'.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

extended beyond the more typically 'feminine' territory of literature and the arts.

During the 1740s, when all three women were in their twenties, they were able to devote a significant amount of time to private study. When Grey and Gregory had families in the 1750s, the intensity of intellectual exchange in their letters waned, giving way to topics of conversation which did not require concerted study to master.¹⁰² However, in these early years it was clear that they applied themselves diligently to reading. Even Mary Grey, the least prone to dramatic confessions concerning her scholarly vocation, wrote from Windsor in August 1741: 'I hope on Wednesday to begin to live, at present I only breathe, for then I expect my Table & Books.'¹⁰³ The strength of this sentiment showed that Mary Grey believed, at around twenty years of age, that intellectual endeavour was inseparable from her life more generally.

Letter-writing was the channel through which the Grey circle were able to maintain their exchange of ideas and this social practice provided a forum to draft considered commentary on history, literature and the arts. Their example demonstrates that an intellectual life could be experienced by women who did not publish their own work but who operated within circles of acquaintance who were conducive to female learning. These women collaborated with male friends on scholarly projects, contributing to the contemporary traffic of ideas. It is highly probable that these letters have been overlooked as examples of intellectual achievement primarily because childrearing for two of the three women obstructed their intellectual pursuits during mid-life. However, the richness of this temporary engagement with the life of the mind is indicative of

¹⁰² By 1750 Mary Gregory (née Grey) had a family of four children and Jemima Grey had two daughters, the first born in 1751 and the second in 1756.

¹⁰³ BLA, LP, L 30/9/53/15: Mary Grey to Jemima Grey, 30 Aug. 1741.

female contributions to the world of ideas and advances the argument for using this evidence to understand more diffuse and diverse cultures of knowledge in this period.

Ultimately, the letters of Clarke, Dormer and the Grey Circle demonstrate the presence and process of a vibrant female intellectual life in a period before women had full access to the institutions of formal education. Moreover, the letter-writers explored here did not operate within exclusively female networks of exchange but also participated in wider, mixed circles of like-minded others. Involved in self-educational practices and epistolary networks of exchange, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women letter-writers provide valuable evidence of a seedbed for change, which would see the broadening of women's opportunities (and public acknowledgement) in the world of ideas.

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